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ABSTRACT

A study sought to promote improved work among six at-risk students in a third-grade writing workshop in a central Virginia school by varying the standard workshop format: mini lesson followed by free writing. The approach was to replace mini-lessons with multi-sensory, hands-on experiences followed by brainstorming activities and evaluate how the provision of such experiences affects students' writing. Taking place over a 3-week period, the study consisted of six interventions with students--two per week. In the first intervention of each week, the experimenters provided a brief mini-lesson related to a theme; then students wrote for 20 minutes. In the second, they provided a hands-on experience thematically similar to that used in the first intervention; then students wrote for 20 minutes. Quantitative analysis took three forms: word count, average length of sentence, and a scale that measured content, creativity, and language usage. The study worked from four hypotheses: (1) at-risk students will rely on the provided experiences for topic ideas and will demonstrate an increased facility in generating detail; (2) with the provided experiences as a catalyst, students' writing will show increased efforts at creativity; (3) after actively participating in the provided experience, students enthusiasm for the writing workshop will increase and attitudes toward writing will improve; and (4) the increased enthusiasm will lead to more on-task behavior during writing time, as students will be more focused and more productive. The first three hypotheses proved true; the fourth met with mixed results. (Contains 20 references and 9 graphs.) (TB)

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Experience Based Writing and the At-Risk Student

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EXPERIENCE BASED WRITING

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Abstract

This study is based in a third grade writing workshop, and it consists of six interventions over a three week period. Three of the interventions include the provision of hands-on experiences for the students, in an attempt to address the needs of the at-risk poulation in the class. Though this study does not quantitatively prove a significant improvement in these students' writing, it indicates a number of positive outcomes. Providing multisensory experiences in lieu of mini-lessons increases at-risk students' enthusiasm for writing. The experience can be used as a writing topic, thus alleviating the frustration at the beginning of writing time, and serving as an impetus for creativity. Such a variation is easy to plan, it fosters the integration of curriculum areas, and it addresses the disparity of experiences which prevails among students.

Experience Based Writing and the At-Risk Child

I. The Problem

Successful teaching practices are in danger of growing stagnant if educators do not consistently strive to improve them. The writing workshop approach to writing instruction is an example of a successful teaching practice. Given ample time to create, coupled with ownership of topic ideas, students become more productive and enthusiastic writers. Nevertheless, there is always room for change and improvement in established routines. This study seeks to address the needs of students not meeting their potential within the writing workshop. By varying the standard workshop format: mini lesson followed by free writing, this study seeks to promote improved work among at-risk writers. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to replace mini-lessons with multi-sensory, hands-on experiences followed by related brainstorming activities and evaluate how the provision of such experiences affects students' writing.

By providing these experiences prior to student writing time, the experimenters anticipate the following outcomes:

* The at-risk students will rely on the provided experiences for topic ideas and will demonstrate an increased facility in generating detail. Accordingly, the average length of the writing samples will increase.

* With the provided experiences as a catalyst, students' writing will show increased efforts at creativity. Students willingness to present original and fictitious works will increase.
* After actively participating in the provided experience, students' enthusiasm for the writing workshop will increase. Attitudes toward writing will improve, and frustration will no longer prevail during the writing time.
* This increased enthusiasm will lead to more on-task behavior during writing time; students will be more focused, and more productive.

The study is designed to take place over a three-week period with two interventions per week. The first intervention of each week is intended to be the control, or "before" sample. The experimenters will provide a brief mini-lesson related to a theme. The lesson will be a time for generating topic ideas, and it will be followed by twenty minutes of students' writing.

The second intervention of each week will include the provision of a hands-on experience thematically similar to the initial intervention in lieu of a mini-lesson. This experience will also be followed by twenty minutes of writing. The lesson and the experience will not dictate students' topics. They will be encouraged to write about anything that interests them. Nevertheless, the theme presented may serve as a support structure for ideas if students choose to rely on it.

Within a class of 18 students, this study is concerned with 6 children identified by the teacher as at-risk in the writing workshop format. Though all students will participate in the mini-lessons and the hands-on experiences, only the at-risk students' writing is relevant to this study.

II. Review of the Literature:

The context of this study is a writing workshop in a third grade classroom. The participants of particular interest are the students considered to be at-risk. The definitions provided by the literature, coupled with logistical considerations in the accompanying field research, will determine how "writing workshop" and "at-risk" are defined for the purpose of this study.

As it is the intent of this project to determine how the provision of positive experiences in the classroom affects students' writing, this review also examines research previously conducted regarding experiential writing.

A. Writing Workshop

Writing in the elementary curriculum has taken on many roles in the past twenty years. Historically, extensive writing activities occurred only in Language Arts. These writing exercises were often limited to topics assigned by the teacher, giving students little or no choice in selecting the subject of their writing. In striking contrast to this style of instruction, trends in education today stress the importance of writing across the curriculum and students' freedom and choice in a writing environment. Often, this integration of practices occurs within the framework of a classroom that uses the writing workshop approach to writing and Language Arts instruction.

Because writing workshop programs are utilized by thousands of teachers in a variety of settings, there is not one concise definition. Ultimately, writing workshop is implemented under the premise that "children must be given time to write every day", and that this time should range between twenty and thirty minutes (Zaragoza, 1987). Furthermore, "the first goal for writers of any age must be fluency--lots of ideas lots of writing, lots of exploration" (Avery, 1992). One can surmise that any writing workshop program must include ample time to write and encourage student ownership of writing.

There are other components of writing programs consistently found in elementary classrooms. For example, Steve Graham and Karen Harris (1993), believe that the writing workshop should include: planning and revision, individual and group conferences, and mini-lessons.

In a study involving at-risk students, Nina Zaragoza drew similar conclusions about the necessary components of a writing program. Zaragoza's writing workshop would include: "time to write, control of topic choice, the right to be actively in control, the right to focus on one skill of the writing process at a time, the right to an audience, and teacher/child conferences" (Zaragoza, 1987). In other words, there are basic aspects that are inherent in Writing Workshop programs.

For all of the similarities found in writing programs, there are differences in the organizational and logistical aspects of Writing Workshop. For example, programs may or may not use mini-lessons. This difference is exemplified in the programs defined by Zaragoza and Harris/Graham. Also, a given program may allow students to peer edit before teacher conferences or vice versa.

Organizational differences are inherent due to the variety of environments and teachers found in our society.

For the purpose of this study, Writing Workshop as organized by the Central Virginia Writing Program will serve as our working definition. This program, taught at the University of Virginia, in its most basic form, consists of a mini-lesson followed by a period of free writing, and concludes with a final group sharing session.

The major difference between the writing programs described thus far and earlier strategies for teaching writing is the element of student control. "The feeling of control is essential in the writing process for through this they [students] learn that the influence of their choices extends beyond their work to the larger classroom environment" (Zaragoza, 1987). Ultimately, a writing program must emphasize the importance of writing as a form of communication that is essential both in the classroom and out in the community. If students choose their topics, they are likely more interested in them than topics imposed upon them by teachers.

B. At-Risk

Despite the benefits of the writing workshop approach to language arts instruction, there are students for whom this is not ideally suited. Within any given classroom, there will be students who struggle with the curriculum. We tend to lump these students experiencing difficulties together and call them at-risk. The term at-risk is readily familiar, but its specific meaning is not apparent. The definition generally depends upon the circumstances of a given situation. Just as

the dynamics and variables of every situation are different, so too are the definitions for the term at-risk. While there are many commonalties in and among various definitions, the specifics depend upon who supplies the definition.

In the early days of identifying and labeling students, the label at-risk referred to students who were "at-risk" of failing in school (Payne and Payne, 1991). Today, the term at-risk likely creates a mental image, but it lacks a universal definition. There is no consistency in how the term is defined. For example, the Council of Chief State School Officers listed, in 1987, over 67 characteristics of at-risk students (Payne and Payne, 1991). Contemporary writers pick and choose between these characteristics to form their own definitions for the term at-risk. Without one accepted definition, researchers have difficulty determining which students are at-risk for different studies. Researchers are forced, in a way, to pick and choose between different definitions to formulate one that suits their purposes.

Trends do exist between definitions put forth by various authors. Those students identified as at-risk are generally thought to be low achievers from low socio-economic status (Mavrogenes, 1994, Weinberg and Weinberg, 1992, Robinson, 1992, Payne and Payne, 1991, and Gentile and McMillan, 1991). Several researchers recognize that students labeled at-risk generally have little supervision at home and come from homes where the importance of school is not stressed (Payne and Payne, 1991, Gentile and McMillan, 1991, Robinson, 1992, and Mavrogenes, 1994).

Beyond the basic similarities in and among different definitions, authors add different elements to their definitions of at-risk. Weinberg and Weinberg

stress that those students labeled at-risk are "hampered by their behaviors in school settings" (1992). Mavrogenes contends that at-risk students generally have uneducated parents, live in dangerous neighborhoods, and are not supported (1994). Robinson holds that at-risk students traditionally lack motivation, are discipline problems, and have short attention spans (1992). Gentile and McMillan believe that at-risk students "live chaotic and turbulent lives. . . [their] home culture is incompatible with the culture of the school..." (1991). Payne and Payne argue that at-risk students generally have low reading abilities and are eligible for free or reduced lunch (1991). These selected elements of the definitions demonstrate the lack of consistency in describing at-risk students.

Researchers are not the only group who define at-risk. Classroom teachers play an important role in determining certain students are at-risk. This is seen as teachers refer students in their classrooms to receive extra support or school services. As teachers hear of programs to help at-risk students, it is their job to determine which of their students is eligible. In this way, teachers are some of the most influential people in defining the term at-risk. "Teacher judgments are almost always initially required either to identify or confirm the designation of students as at-risk" (Payne and Payne, 1991).

While the writing workshop approach to writing works beautifully with some students, it does not work so well with others. Often, students identified as at-risk do not perform to their potential. They tend to become distracted and seem to require more structure. "We discovered that much more structure and explicit strategy instruction were needed for these students to be successful in expository writing than are needed for most students" (Salvage and Brazee, 1991). The

freedom of the writing workshop can prove to be too much freedom for those students who are struggle with deficient reading and writing skills. Remediation is not the solution, but rather, additional support in the existing writing workshop environments is the solution. With a few safeguards implemented by teachers, these students can be insured the opportunity to see themselves as readers and writers.

For the purpose of this study, at-risk students are defined as those who are reading and writing below grade level but who are not already identified and receiving services. The six students examined in this project are all recipients of free lunch and come from low socio-economic status. Admittedly, this definition is not purely the product of one researcher, but rather, a blend of many definitions, coupled with the dynamics of the classroom used for the study.

C. Experiential Writing

This study suggests that part of what these at-risk students lack is appropriate, positive, colorful life experiences to serve as potential writing topics. The researchers do not mean to suggest that the lack of such experiences is the sole cause of their difficulty, rather, that the provision of in-class experiences is a way to improve their performance in a writing workshop environment. Existing literature consistently urges teachers to promote writing from life experiences, credits good writers with an ability to recount experiences, and acknowledges the potential in-class activities have for prompting improved writing.

A premise of the effective writing workshop, as previously explained, is the notion of ownership of ideas. Gone are the days when teachers arbitrarily imposed a contrived topic and format upon their students. The literature which defines writing workshop (previously noted) insists that students choose their own topics and write about subjects that matter to them. Literature which offers suggestions for improving writing workshop is equally adamant on this point, insisting that students' experiences be their topics. Cramer (1992), Salvage and Brazee (1991), and Nessel and Jones (1994) offer identical advice, urging teachers to encourage their students to write about their life, their experiences. Each suggests that fostering students' awareness of these events and their potential as writing topics is essential for promoting productive writing workshops. Nessel and Jones (1994) assert that, "If you help your students realize that their own experiences can provide plenty of material for fascinating characters and stories, narrative writing will become easier -- and actually exciting -- for them." In other words, life experiences can become the substance of students' writing.

Throughout literature, researchers illustrate this point by citing exemplary writers. McDermott (1990) noted the similarities she had encountered in quality student writing. Each example, ranging from a kindergartner's story about his encounter with chicken pox to a student's Advanced Placement Exam essay, were honest recollections of life experiences. Cramer (1992) points to Beverly Cleary's tendency to write about her own children and Robert Newton Peck's sharing of his childhood activities in his book Soup. Cramer encourages teachers to offer these and other authors as models of experiential writing for their students.

Unfortunately, not all students lead adventurous lives. Many of those who do, fail to acknowledge the value of their experiences. Salvage and Brazee (1991) note this difficulty for at-risk students. In their study, "almost all of [the students] had trouble believing they had anything worthwhile to say or that anyone would be interested in what they know." Recognizing such hesitancy, this study seeks to provide students with in-class experiences which might serve as the substance for writing topics.

Existing literature acknowledges the potential of in-class activities for prompting quality writing. Scarnati and Weller (1992) claim science activities equalize classmates along many lines saying, "students share the same learning experience during the activity, they have a common knowledge base upon which to build and develop Language Arts skills." It is impossible to ignore discrepancies in the life experiences of students, and it is from these varied memories that unique writing topics are expected to emerge. By providing colorful experiences in their classrooms, teachers enable their students to write confidently, and with substance. Scarnati and Weller (1992) offer examples of creative experiences in the science classroom including a hands-on examination of an earthworm and a bulb-lighting experiment. They claim that "such activities develop a solid foundation for writing."

III. Design of the Study:

A. Sample

This study takes place in a small community school of approximately 200 students in a city school system in Central Virginia. The third grade class examined consists of eighteen students --six boys and twelve girls--and a classroom teacher with an extensive background in education. The class is made up of students performing at two levels; those who achieve significantly above grade level and those who achieve below grade level. Of the six students in our at-risk sample group, five are female and one is male. Each of these students is either reading below grade level or struggling to perform at grade level. Examination of writing samples also reveals their struggles in Writing Workshop. The following descriptions and baseline writing samples were obtained with the assistance of the cooperating teacher.

Student 1--Julie

Julie is a nine year old African American female who is reads at a beginning second grade or level six reader in a basal series. Based on her ability to accurately spell high frequency words and her good attempts at tougher words, Julie is in the transitional stage of invented spelling (Salinger, 1993). Her personal life is often chaotic as she recently moved in with her grandmother. Because of this instability, Julie has few positive experiences on which to base her writing. In this classic example, she writes about the day before swimming. Since she has never had experiences upon which to base her writing, she writes about the day before an event. Due to Julie's below level class work and her unstable home life, writing is a laborious process.

Baseline Sample--Student 1

"The day befor simme day"

> The day before simme day me and (Jennifer) and (Emily) had to run a oplclcos to get our dody in shape we ran it 3 times. and we nofe sode danw and whin we gor thow we run a lape and whin we thow run a lap we got on the swag.

Student 2--Sarah

Sarah is an eight year old African American female. She lives in a single parent home with her mother; her father plays a minor role in her life. She also reads at a beginning second grade or a level six basal reader. Sarah truly struggles in both spelling and grammar. She also has difficulty varying her topics. Although she is successful in spelling high frequency words, she tends to struggle with unfamiliar words. Sarah exhibits elements of both the letter-name and transitional stages of spelling (Salinger, 1993). Sarah shows little consistent use of punctuation or capital letters, and her stories are often one long sentence. Her writing topics center around family members and friends. Generally, there is no element of fiction.

Baseline writing--Student 2

"My mom is back"

> My mom came back on tuseday afidnoon I was suipersed I did not on she was comeing she had a good time she sada at my anut hows and she wamt out and she did not go spein bu she bout me ome broseats and the are sever she want to marellenlle and I want to my suster howes and we ordered a sude and I sund nithg with her and I had a bolil my sisters tave they make me do arve thing.

Student 3--Luke

Luke is a nine year old African American male who lives in a shelter for battered women and children. It is presumed that Luke's struggling in school

correlates to his mother's drug and alcohol use during pregnancy. He, like the first two students, is reading at a beginning second grade level or in a level six basal series. Luke seems the most deficient of our sample set in the areas of reading and writing. Luke is clearly in the letter name stage of invented spelling and his handwriting is difficult to read (Salinger, 1993). His stories are very brief and almost always relate to school in some way.

Baseline Sample--Luke

"School"

> School is vare fun be cos you can lrn and you can red and you can hiv good gras and you can

Student 4--Katherine

Katherine is an eight year old African American female who comes from a two parent home in which both mother and father work. She is reading at a beginning second grade or a level six basal reader. Although she struggles with invented spelling, (she exhibits elements of both a letter-name and transitional stage speller) her ability to write creative fiction and non-fiction stories is terrific (Salinger, 1993). Her stories are often based on experiences she has had in school or at home. Her sample shows an awareness of a variety of grammatical elements including quotation marks, capital letters, and punctuation. Katherine's stories usually include a beginning, middle, and conclusion.

Baseline Sample--Katherine

"The Spaleing Be"

> It all began wen Jaoweyy was waking in the hall on the frest day of school. he was laest. The pensupill said you sida be in you clas. "I am liess he saaid. waet is your name. it is Jaowe I have to get to my class. When did the thra said tar is a spaleing be on friday a boy nake to him was cuping oof his papor at reses. He old his fend Sozey Hi Sozey he said I have a prolu on the spling bee. The bay next to me coped my pepor.

Student 5--Ann

Ann is an eight year old black female who lives with her mother, however her father does support the family financially and plays a role in her life. As a reader, Ann is only slightly behind grade level. She reads at a beginning third grade level or as a level eight basal reader. Her spelling is good with high frequency words, and she successfully uses invented spelling with more difficult words. Salinger would classify Ann as both a letter-name and as a transitional speller (1993). Her writing style is to ask and answer her own questions. She is aware and correctly uses capital letters and punctuation. Also her stories are usually based on school events thus revealing a lack of positive experiences outside of school on which to base her writing.

Baseline Sample--Ann

"Math"

> We are lrng new thag's in math new.
> Like what?

Muney like drlld, quords, nekos, pene, cove drllrs,
What did you lrn when you was in three grade?
When you was in three grade did you gent ever home wark or hord home wark?
Muney is hord dot you thek so?
We had a tast yos day whet money I mist tow I trid my dast.

Student 6--Teresa

Teresa is an eight year old African American female who lives with two parents, both of whom work. She also reads as a beginning third grader, or a level eight basal reader. She successfully spells high frequency words and uses invented spelling on harder words. Teresa is in the transitional stage of spelling (Salinger, 1993). She does not consistently use punctuation or capital letters, and her subject verb agreement is weak. Her writing is extremely creative and is a showcase for her unique sense of humor. She often combines fictions and non-fiction by using family members in her stories.

Baseline Sample--Teresa

The Talkin Dressers

One sun afternoon we was just moneing my mom siad or rooms liiked eddy so she siad she was going to by my dad siad of playhouse needit to be full so he siad he wook by some so they full all the houses with dresser One night I work up to jet me something to drik then I hard something go is pase you bed time little boy and he now is my or dad cames down stirs when im down hear because they would sllep then I hard somethin say I got the blues and one siad me me to and no one haves blues in this house.

B. Measures

Choosing appropriate quantitative measures for this study proved to be a difficult task. Because of the nature of this study, improvements in writing could best be judged by scales that measure length of writing and creativity. The simplest and perhaps most effective way to measure the length of a story is by a word count. "Simple word count is an indicator of productivity" (Spaulding, 1989). A comparison of word count after each writing workshop revealed whether writing was easier or harder as a result of some experience. In other words, if a student wrote more, it is assumed they struggled less. Increases in length could also be associated with on-task behavior.

The average sentence length, or ASL, is another effective measure for this study. The ASL is computed by counting the total number of words and dividing this by the total number of sentences (Minner, Prater, Sullavan, and Gwaltney 1989). One can also consider ASL a measure of fluency--the quantity of writing one produces (Minner, Prater, Sullavan, and Gwaltney, 1989). The larger the ASL the more mature the writer (Minner, Prater, Sullavan, and Gwaltney, 1989). For our study, ASL would measure changes in sophistication and increases in vocabulary as a result of an experience.

The most difficult of this literature search was identifying a measure of creativity in writing. Because of this inability to locate an appropriate measure, an adaptation of Marrogenes and Bezruczko was combined with a scale designed by the experimenters, taking creativity into account (1993). Marrogenes and Bezruczko designed the original scale in which three subsections, worth two points each, were added together for a potential total score of six (1993). Two of Marrogenes and Bezruczko's subsections were used for the experimenters' adapted

scale: content and language usage (1993). To receive a perfect score of two for content, a student's writing had to reflect one fully developed idea (Marrogenes and Bezruczko, 1993). A score of one represents one single, simple idea, and a score of zero was given for garbled writing (Marrogenes and Bezruczko, 1993). Similarly for language usage, a score of two reflected consistent subject/verb agreement and use of complete sentences, a score of one represented subject/verb agreement and complete sentences over fifty percent of the time, and a score of zero meant that a student's writing revealed subject/verb agreement and complete sentences less than fifty percent of the time (Marrogenes and Bezruczko, 1993). Finally, creativity was judged as a two if a writer presented an original idea, a one if the writer made an attempt at an original idea, and a zero if the writer merely recalled facts. This new scale offered an overall impression of the writing and revealed whether or not a student benefited from the experience.

The most important measures in this study are the qualitative measures. Through observations made while students wrote, judgments were made regarding whether or not the experiences provided were beneficial or detrimental. Observations of on-task behavior, motivation, and attitude seemed most appropriate. Although qualitative measures are subjective, they are an element of this study which cannot be overlooked.

C. Design

This study took place over three weeks. Two visits were scheduled in each of the three weeks. During each visit, the whole class participated. The

researchers did not wish to isolate those students considered at-risk, so they included the whole class. For the purpose of this study, however, researchers collected only writing samples of those considered at-risk. A description of how these writing samples were evaluated is provided later in this discussion.

The first visit of each week consisted of some type of brainstorming activity (approximately 15 minutes) related to the week's topic, led by one researcher, followed by a 20 minute writing period. The second visit of each week consisted of the researchers providing the students with some type of relevant, sensory experience/activity (approximately 15 minutes) instead of a mini-lesson, followed by a 20 minute writing period. Each experience related to the first visit of each week. Students were divided into two groups of eight for each experience so that students would be in smaller groups in which they would hopefully participate more actively than if they had all been grouped together. It is important to note that at no point during the study were the students forced to write on any given topic. While discussions were geared toward providing legitimate writing topics, students were free to write on topics of their choice.

At the conclusion of each writing period, researchers collected writing samples from each child. Once all work was collected, the researchers photocopied the writing of those students involved in the study and returned student folders. Throughout the study, students were not told why they were working with the university students. They were told that the researchers were doing a project for the University of Virginia.

Week 1

The topic for week one was nature. The introductory lesson was preceded by the first warm weekend in which many students invariably spent time outside. This lesson began with a brainstorming activity in which the students were asked about things they could do with nature and in nature. As the list began taking shape with ideas such as "build a fort" and "make a raft" the discussion leader was sure to suggest that their writing did not have to be non-fiction. Their writing could be any style they wished. As students began to write, several of the at-risk students had difficulty with the process. Two students did not generate any writing, others were disruptive to classmates, and others demonstrated much off-task behavior.

On the second visit, the students went on a nature walk and got to hold worms supplied by the researchers. They focused on sensory aspects of the experience. At the beginning of the walk, students were asked to be quiet and try to hear something that no one else could hear. They were challenged to see something they thought no one else would be able to find. They were asked to try to smell something in nature that they had never noticed before. As students shared their responses to the above senses, they began to notice the unusual in the seemingly ordinary.

As the nature walk continued, students were asked what type of animal in nature they would like to be and why. The students were reminded that they

could not share what animal they would like to be unless they could tell others why they would like to be that animal. This questioning got students to think of nature from different perspectives and explain these perspectives to their peers.

The final event of the nature walk was the introduction of the worms. Each child who wanted to hold a worm was allowed. As the students described how the worm looked and felt, they described how they thought the worms might be feeling as they were picked up and removed from their homes in the soil. The children were quick to reply that the worms might be feeling scared, cold, unsure, etc. At the conclusion of the walk, students were responsible for putting their worms in safe places in the woods.

On the walk inside, students were told to try to think of a writing topic before they got inside. As students returned to their desks, they wrote with facility and were excited about their writing. Every student wrote, and off-task behavior decreased visibly. Children did not run out of ideas during the 20 minute writing period. In fact, several students wanted to continue writing after the timer rung. These students continued their writings later in the week.

Week 2

This week's topic was food. During the first visit, students worked together to generate a web of ideas about food. Initially the list was composed of favorites and least favorites, but the discussion leader shifted the brainstorming to include things about food that might be included in a non-fiction story. That prompt resulted in suggestions such as "food fights" and "magic foods." At the

conclusion of this activity, students were reminded that they were free to write on any topic they chose and they were reminded that they were to write for the whole 20 minutes. Student writing during this period was brief and labored. Students did not develop ideas enough to write for 20 minutes.

The experience provided in week two was pudding making. Researchers divided the class into two groups of nine. In each group, tasks were assigned. One student poured the powder into the jar. Another student measured the milk. Another student poured the milk into the powder, and so forth. Once the ingredients were added, the work began; shaking the pudding until it was the right consistency. Each group formed a circle. The first time around, each child had to shake the pudding in a different way. Children were encouraged to be as creative as they could for this activity. As the pudding went around the circle for the second time, each child had to come up with a word to describe how they thought the pudding would taste. The third time around, students were challenged to come up with an original word to describe a food fight, and the fourth time around, students were to use one word to describe what it would be like to have a bathtub filled with pudding.

Once the pudding was thick enough to eat, students were reminded to think of something they could write about based upon what they had just done or another writing topic. As the children wrote, they were given a paper cup of pudding. Time did not allow the children to finish writing before they ate, so many of the children were distracted by the food they were given. Student writing after this experience resulted in many more poems and creative expression. Children frequently used the descriptive words shared during pudding shaking in

their poems to describe foods. Two of the children considered to be at-risk wrote fiction stories about chocolate water fountains and a candy bar that a baby ate.

Week 3

Week three was two weeks after week two. Spring break interrupted the cycle, so the final week of the study was scheduled after spring break and focused on animals. During the first visit, students brainstormed a list of their favorite animals. Each child supplied one response. The second time around the room, students thought of one good describing word they would use to describe their favorite animals. A tally was kept of the more frequently used adjectives. The children were familiar with this structure of lesson, so they were ready to begin writing at the conclusion of this brainstorming activity. Again, the timer was set for 20 minutes and students were reminded to write the whole time on a topic of their choice.

The final visit allowed the students to play with a golden retriever and role play being different animals. Students were divided into two heterogeneous groups and the children alternated activities. The groups with Emmett (the dog) got to walk him, brush him, pet him, and "shake" with him. The structure of the activity was informal and allowed for the children to interact with the dog comfortably. Children were asked about how they would feel if they were on a leash, how they would feel if they were covered with fur, and how they would feel if they were surrounded with third graders. The children focused their attention on the sensory aspects of this experience. They commented on how Emmett's fur

felt, how he smelled, what it felt like to walk him and have him pull on the leash, and other sensorial experiences.

The second half of this lesson required the students to act role play being animals. In this discussion, students identified which animals would be friends with them and which would be enemies. This activity was designed to help refine student ideas and try to channel their thoughts into their writing. Due to scheduling difficulties, half of the class did not do the role play activity. Once they had finished playing with Emmett, they went inside and began writing. The other half of the class did the role-play activity first and then played with Emmett.

The student writing collected from this lesson was a mixture. Many students wrote poems, others wrote narratives, and others wrote fiction stories. Some students were so busy writing that they generated more than one piece during the 20 minute writing period.

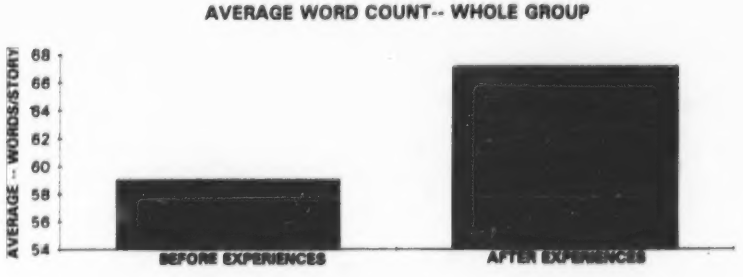
D. Analysis

As explained previously, quantitative analysis of our data took three forms: word count, average sentence length, and a scale that took into account content, creativity, and language usage. Three different analyses of these measures were used in our sample. First, an average of the word count from the whole group's before writing samples of each week was compared with a similarly calculated average from the samples taken after the experiences. The same comparison was used for average sentence length and overall writing scale. Then, the before and after average word count, ASL, and overall writing scale scores of all children for

each week were compared. Finally, we compared each child's before and after averages of all three weeks so as to account for dramatic individual improvements or setbacks. Averages proved the best method of comparison for this study because of rampant absenteeism. By using averages, we could still compare the data collected before and after on an equal basis even if there was a difference in the total number of samples collected for each.

An average word count for the whole group was calculated by tabulating each child's word count from the before samples, adding them together and dividing by the total number of samples. Of the eighteen possible samples (six students/three weeks), a total of fifteen were actually collected. The average word count for the before samples was 59 words/story. After the experience, seventeen out of eighteen possible samples were collected and the average word count climbed to 67.12 words/story. It is also important to note that of the before samples collected, three of the fifteen wrote nothing. In the after samples, every student wrote something. This data reveals that the at-risk children benefited from the experience; they had substantially more background on which to base their writing, therefore the average number of words in each study increased (See graph #1).

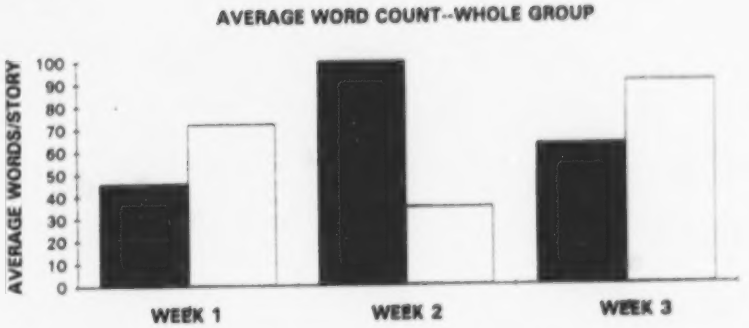
Graph #1:



A comparison of all six students' word count averages by week revealed some startling disparities. In the "Nature" theme week, six out of six possible samples were collected, and the average word count was calculated as 45.6 words/story. Again, we must note that of these six samples, two students wrote nothing in the twenty minutes allotted. After the experience, five out of six possible samples were collected. The average word count rose to 72 words/story. Similarly, in the "Animal" theme week, of the five samples collected before the experience, the average word count was 62.4 words/story, however, in the six samples collected after the experience the word count average rose to 90.5 words/story. Therefore, the experiences of the first and third week had dramatic effects on the quantity of writing these at-risk students produced in a twenty minute period (See graph #2).

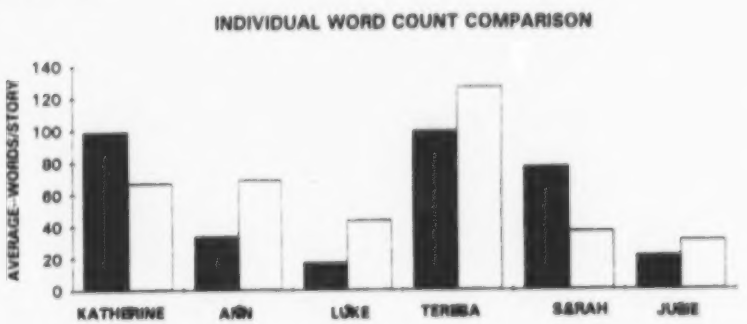
Startling results were revealed in comparison of the before and after samples of the "Food" theme week. Three before samples were collected and the average word count was 99.67 words/story, however in the six post-experience samples, the word count fell to 34.67 words/story. This dramatic decrease can be explained by two significant factors. First, the before sample group only had three samples, and of those three were two of the stronger writers. Also, during the writing time after the pudding experience, the students were allowed to eat their pudding. This definitely distracted the students and accounted for the large decrease in productivity (See graph #2).

Graph #2:



An average of the before and after samples of each student revealed results similar to those found in the previous two comparisons. Of the six children in our study, four improved significantly in the quantity of writing produced. Although we deemed the improvements in productivity as very important, an independent T-test did find the changes in any of our word count data analysis to be significant (See graph #3).

Graph #3:

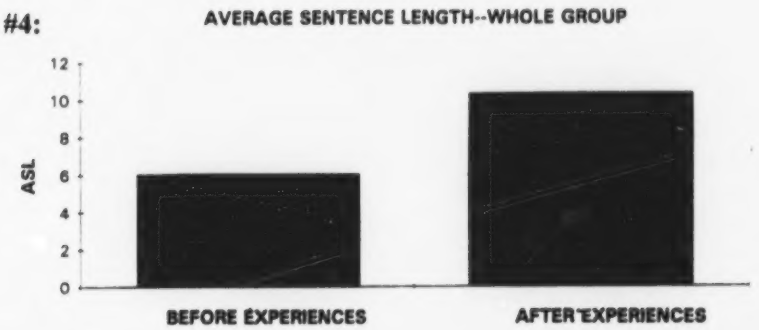


Several reasons can be cited as to why Katherine and Sarah appear to have been negatively affected by the experiences (See graph #3). First, Katherine decided to use poetry as a means of creative writing after the food experience. As a result in the after sample her word count was only 10, whereas in the before

sample she wrote a lengthy story of 116 words. Also, Katherine was a much stronger writer than the rest of our sample before this study began. Therefore, all of her before and after totals for word count were very close even in light of the experiences provided. Sarah also fell dramatically in her average word count after the experiences. The main reason for this is the lack of collected before samples from Sarah. Since Sarah was only present for one of the three before-writing periods, it appears that she was inhibited by the experiences. However, like Katherine, Sarah also used poetry as a means of expression. Furthermore, Sarah wrote two post-experience stories about subjects other than her family. This added dimension to her writing could be attributed to the experiences provided in this study.

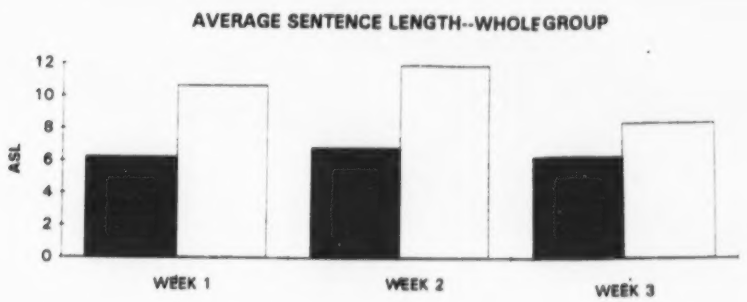
As described previously, increases in average sentence length would represent increases in fluency. Our study used the same three comparisons of average described above to analyze the data obtained for average sentence length. Analysis of the sample sets' fifteen before writings for all three weeks revealed an overall average score of 5.99 sentences /story. As anticipated, the ASL for the seventeen sample stories written after the experiences increased to 10.27 sentences/story. Therefore, the average sentence length of each story increased by approximately four sentences. As a result, one can surmise that because of the experiences provided, the at-risk students had more ideas to write about and were able to put these ideas on paper (See graph #4).

Graph #4:



An examination of the mean of average sentence length on a weekly scale also revealed significant increases. Again, as a group, the students ASL increased from 6.23 sentences/story to 10.64 sentences/story as a result of the experiences provided in week one. Similarly, the ASL for the before writings of week 2 was 6.79 sentences/story whereas the ASL for the post-experience writings increased to 11.9 sentences/story. Finally, in week three the ASL score increased from 6.28 sentences/story to 8.35 sentences/story. Therefore, after a week to week look at ASL, marked improvements can be noted in the fluency of these students writing (See graph #5).

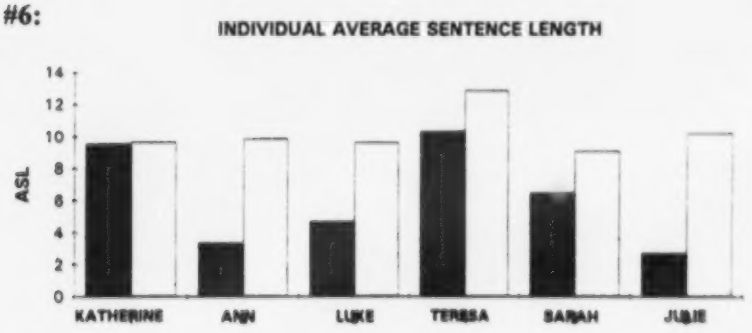
Graph #5:



A final ASL data analysis of each child's average performance throughout the duration of this experiment revealed an increase in every child's performance.

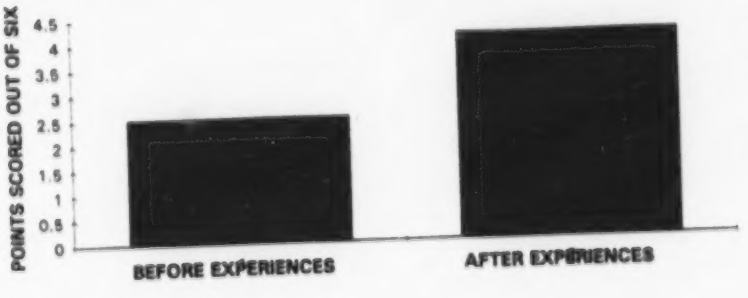
Ultimately, the experiences provided in our study had tremendously positive effects on the fluency and productivity of these six students in writing workshop (See graph #6).

Graph #6:



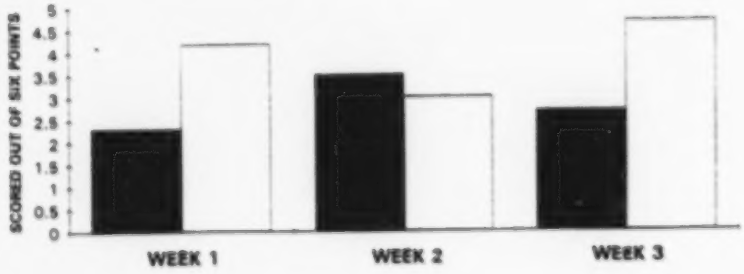
The final data analysis centers around the modified scale for rating a story's overall quality. Again, we used the averages of the whole group's work for the entire study, the whole groups' work on a weekly basis, and individual work for the entire study. The average score on our scale for the before samples was 2.5/6. After the experiences, the average score climbed to 4.1/6. This increase signifies that the writings produced after the experiences increased marginally in the areas aforementioned (See graph #7)

Graph #7:



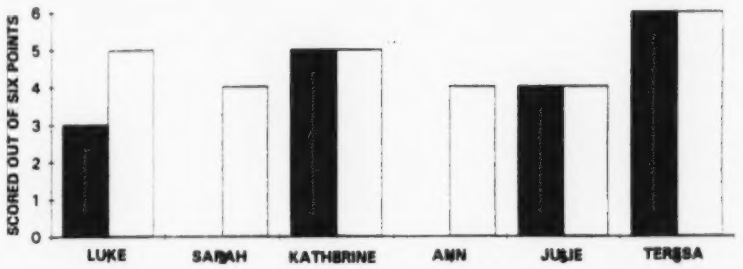
By examining the scores in our scale on a weekly basis, improvements are noted in weeks one and three. Scores improved from 2.3/6 to 4.2/6 and 2.67/6 to 4.67/6 in weeks one and three, respectively. In week two the scores on our scale dropped from 3.5/6 to 3/6. Although this is a minor decrease, the explanation is similar to that for the decrease in word count scores for week number two. Because the children were focused on their pudding and not on their writing, the quality and quantity of the samples suffered (See graph #8).

Graph #8:



Lastly, data analysis of overall individual performances revealed that four students improved, two remained the same, and one regressed according to our scale. Again, explanations similar to those in the word count section can be reapplied to this section. Sarah dropped from 3/6 to 1.8/6 overall; this can be attributed to the minute number of samples obtained from her--three. Katherine and Teresa remained constant because of their pre-existing strengths as a writers (See graph #9).

Graph #9:



The findings from data analysis of our scale did not show significant increases overall, but this is to be expected. One must keep in mind that these evaluations are performed on the students' very rough first draft. Since our scale measured language usage--an aspect that was not taught in our mini-lessons and one that these at-risk students obviously have trouble with--it is expected that they would not improve in this area. The portion of our scale that students did improve on is creativity. This is directly correlated to having positive, first-hand experiences on which to base their writing. Because of these two factors, scores on our scale did increase, but only minimally.

Qualitative observations were made during the Writing Workshops held before the experiences, and they are quite telling as to the struggles at-risk students face daily. Off-task behavior appeared rampant. Luke, recently fitted with new glasses, repeatedly removed and fidgeted with them. He wrote nothing in the first writing session. During the second pre-experience writing, Luke spent five of twenty minutes stamping his paper. Ann, in the third pre-experience, began to cry because she could not think of anything to write about. Sarah continuously disrupted the children on either side of her and walked around the room three

times in one twenty minute period. From these brief observations, one can surmise that (1) this happens on a regular basis in writing workshop, (2) little quality writing is being produced.

The changes in the at-risk students' attitude and behavior in writing workshop was dramatic. Children were excited to write and focused on their work. Issues of length of time did not arise--they continued to write for the entire allotted time. All of the children wrote after every experience, whereas some failed to write in the pre-experience sessions. They expanded their writings to include poetry--an added element of creativity that emerged after the experiences. Furthermore, they were able to stray from their standard topics of school and family because of the positive experiences. Qualitatively, the improvements in attitude and behavior were dramatically increased as a result of providing simple, positive experiences before Writing Workshop.

IV. Analysis of Results

Before implementing the proposed plan, the experimenters outlined specific hypotheses. The study provided a means to determine the accuracy of each of these, through a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. The following is a restatement of these predictions and an analysis of how the results of the study correspond to each.

1. The at-risk students will rely on the provided experiences for topic ideas and will demonstrate an increased facility in

generating detail. Accordingly, the average length of the writing samples will increase.

Students did rely on the provided experiences for topic ideas. Perhaps one of the greatest successes of this study was the discovery that at-risk students do benefit from additional support in the writing workshop. When asked to write about anything that interested them, every at-risk child chose to respond in some way to the provided experience.

The second half of this prediction proved to be less accurate. An increased facility in generating detail did not always lead to increased length of writing samples. At least two factors affected this. The study only allowed for the creation of rough drafts written during a twenty minute time period. The drafts written after the multi-sensory experience were then compared to the drafts after the mini-lesson. The average length of these drafts did not show a significant increase according to the T-test, but it is possible that final drafts might reflect such an increase if students were provided the opportunity to create them. Hindsight suggests that first drafts created in twenty minutes on two separate occasions are not likely to vary greatly in length, regardless of the difference in the writing workshop format.

Another factor which affected the lengths of the second writing samples was students' attempts at poetry. Though an increase in length can often serve as evidence for better writing, this is not the case when a fiction story is being compared to a poem. A number of students chose to write poems after the experience ranging from Cinquains about worms and pudding, to Acrostic poems about dogs; the length of these is irrelevant and should not be deemed inferior to

their first writing sample.

2. With the provided experiences as a catalyst, students' writing will show increased efforts at creativity. Students willingness to present original and fictitious works will increase.

The previously mentioned attempts at poetry are evidence that this hypothesis was confirmed. Measuring creativity is difficult and subjective, but the 6 point scale modified for this study to account for creativity limited the subjectivity as much as possible. This analysis of language usage, content, and creativity indicated the greatest improvement in student performance. An increased number of students developed a coherent idea throughout a piece, rather than presenting a series of unrelated ideas. Rather than retelling adventures from Math class or their After School program, many students attempted either fiction or poetry writing, or both. Conclusions regarding creativity are inherently subjective, but the experiential writing in this study did prompt more attempts at creativity and originality than did the standard mini-lesson.

3. After actively participating in the provided experience, students' enthusiasm for the writing workshop will increase. Attitudes toward writing will improve, and frustration will no longer prevail at the beginning of writing time.

Measuring enthusiasm is as subjective a process as measuring creativity. But through careful observation of student behavior, and attentiveness to verbal feedback, it is measurable. Observations from the first intervention of each week

indicated that enthusiasm was low and frustration high for some of the at-risk writers. One student cried because she could not choose a topic, while another angrily insisted that she would only write a sentence. Fortunately, the experiences with nature, pudding, and pets altered these attitudes. There were no comparable outbursts or incidents, and students eagerly explained their works-in-progress when questioned by the experimenters. The only frustration voiced during the second intervention of each week was from those unable to share during author's chair due to time constraints, proving this third hypothesis to be accurate.

4. This increased enthusiasm will lead to more on-task behavior during writing time, students will be more focused, and more productive.

This hypothesis was met with mixed results. Students did exhibit more on-task behavior at the beginning of writing time. Initial observations of the at-risk students indicated that restlessness prevailed. Students were distracted by objects in their desks, other work in their writing folder, their clothing, and one another. Stamping the date on their paper with a rubber stamp took some students an inordinate amount of time. The difficulty was choosing a topic. In fact, it was so difficult that two of our subjects produced no writing on one occasion. With the provision of the hands-on experience, beginning a piece became a less daunting task, and start-up time was less eventful. There was a noticeable reduction in distractions during this time because students were anxious to respond in writing to the experience.

Providing an experience did not eliminate off-task behavior. A few management difficulties arose during the study. The pudding experience did not

begin and end before writing time began; rather, time constraints dictated that students eat their pudding while writing. Clearly, this was not an ideal writing environment, and students were understandably distracted by their snack. And as a result of student groups transitioning from activity to writing at different times, there was the distraction of students entering and exiting the room while others were writing during each of the interventions. Even the creativity and enthusiasm for writing led to a difficulty with on-task behavior. Students wanting to collaborate with one another to write a creative piece were permitted to do so, but they proved to be such a distraction to each other that their focus on writing was lost. Though the hypothesis proved to be true for the initial stage of writing, specific behavior and time management incidents did arise.

This study does not prove that providing hands-on experiences in lieu of a mini-lesson results in a significant improvement in at-risk students' writing. It does suggest that such a variation leads to many positive outcomes. Students' enthusiasm for writing increases, and frustration in choosing a topic decreases. Many students respond to a thematic structure, and rely on provided experiences as an impetus for original ideas. And using the experience as a prompt, an increased number of students attempt creative and fictitious works.

V. Summary and Conclusions

This study was an intervention in one classroom which sought to address the needs of at-risk students and propose a variation to the standard workshop

format. As it resulted it a number of successes, a similar variation might prove beneficial in any classroom with a writing workshop.

Experiences similar to those presented in this study promote cooperation and discovery-based learning for all students, and those who are at-risk are receptive to the potential connections between the experience and their writing. Disparity often prevails, and many students have not had the opportunity to engage in thought-provoking experiences outside the classroom. Accordingly, a variation of this sort can serve as an equalizer. The experience may prompt a recollection of other experiences, or it may serve as a writing topic.

Logistically, varying the writing workshop as this study suggests is simple. The experiences are easy to plan, the materials are inexpensive, and each takes approximately twenty minutes of class time. More importantly, these experiences foster connections between the curriculum areas. Science can be easily integrated into the writing workshop, as evidenced by the nature and pet interventions in this study. Integrating curriculum areas makes the material more relevant and understandable for students, while encouraging them to make practical connections as they apply the information.

Any modification of the standard workshop has the potential to prompt increased student interest. While routines are beneficial, they ought not become monotonous. Occasionally substituting an entertaining experience for a teacher-directed mini-lesson results in enthusiasm. If it is carefully guided, and thought provoking questions are posed during the experience, thoughtful written responses are produced.

It is the intent of this study to affirm writing workshops. Students value time devoted to writing, and they value the ownership of topic ideas. The subjects of this study were students who struggle in such an environment. They have difficulty recalling their experiences and choosing topics for their writing, and often times their writing lacks the creativity and originality characteristic of their peers' writing. They exhibited remarkable enthusiasm as they explored nature, made pudding, and interacted with a golden retriever in the brief interventions this study provided. This enthusiasm was reflected in their willingness to write, their application of the experience in the written responses, and their increased tendency towards creative and original writing. There are many ways to vary the standard writing workshop, new ways to do so might be the subject of further research. The results of this study suggest that occasionally providing hands-on experiences in lieu of a mini-lesson is a variation worth trying.

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